

The Future of Distributed Education at Cornell: a Call for a Strategic Plan

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Introduction

Looking back at the influences of major technological innovations on societies causes one to recognize that many, perhaps most, of the changes brought about by technology would have been hard to predict. Given that fact, it would seem ill advised to constrict the possible development of distributed education at Cornell by forcing it to conform to some preconceived strategic plan. However, the potential influence of distributed education on the nature of the University is so profound, I will argue, that letting the technology develop without careful and continuing oversight of its impact would be unwise. I imply neither that the technological change should be resisted, nor that its influence will necessarily be negative. The thesis is simply that any change with the potential to affect the basic nature of our institution deserves careful thought by all members of the community.

Predicting the Unpredictable

Two forces of considerable influence in an American University are driving the move towards increasing use of distributed education techniques. One is pedagogy the other is revenue enhancement.

Among the few things on which an entire university faculty can surely agree is that the exchange of ideas, information, and opinions is enterprise that benefits society at large. If distributed education widens the boundaries within which such exchanges can occur, or even removes boundaries altogether, it would appear that any academic should welcome it. And if, in the process, it provides means to bring significant additional income to the University, those in charge of the financial health of the institution should presumably welcome it too. So where is the catch? That's what is unpredictable; because the future capabilities of the technology and the extent to which it will be adopted are both unknown, the influence of distributed education on University life could be anywhere from minor to revolutionary. But because the potential for significant impact is there, I believe we need to give it serious attention. The questions that I raise are consequently predicated on the assumption of a large-scale adoption of distributed-education methods.

Many of us like to think of the University as a community of scholars. How would the quality of that community be affected if its members were distributed all over the country or all over the world? Would students have the same sense of institutional identity if they did not actually spend several years together on the same campus? What would that mean for alumni loyalty? What does the advising role of a faculty member become if the professor and student never actually meet? How valuable for faculty is face-to-face contact with colleagues in the development of research and teaching ideas? Could that be replaced in the virtual community?

Conversation with students suggests that many come to an institution such as Cornell for reasons other than the quality of the classroom teaching. The reasons may include the ability to participate in forefront research, the ability to meet fellow students with similar interests and aspirations (but possibly quite different backgrounds), and, frankly, the ability to parlay the Ivy League name on their degree into a good job. Does this set of motives mean that the residential program would persist even in a world where use of distributed education technology was widespread? If so, how would the demographics of the residential student body change? What would be the relative cost of a residential and nonresidential degree? Would that price structure influence who came to Ithaca?

In a university where use of distributed education has become widespread, the rights and responsibilities of the faculty would seem to need substantial redefinition. What happens to the idea of a “teaching load” if a course may be produced once and then reproduced many times without further input from the faculty member? What happens to the idea of individual intellectual property rights if a large group of people and large amounts of money from the University have been employed in the development of a distributed education program? How comfortable would the University be in producing and widely distributing a program whose content was highly controversial?

The range of activities that is contained in the concept “education” is vast. Not all of these activities are likely to be equally influenced by distributed-education. This asymmetric impact of the technology may be amplified by its substantial cost. Who will decide whether a particular course merits the expenditure of resources for development in a distributed-education format, and what will be the criteria used in making such a decision? If certain kinds of courses fit more naturally than others into the new framework, what will be the impact on the idea of a liberal arts education for the non-residential student?

Continuing Education

It is the potentially significant impact that distributed education may have on University life that leads me to think some strategic planning is vital. And yet how can we plan for something whose very nature is so unpredictable? It must begin, I believe, with comprehensive education of the faculty about the current capabilities of the technology. A Faculty Forum such as this one is a useful contribution, but it does not engage the attention of enough of our colleagues. I believe that the University administration should sponsor an education program to take place at the department level. It could include demonstrations of the most relevant technology by those already using it, but should also allow plenty of time for discussion and questions.

Because the technology is sure to change, this first-time education program will not be sufficient. There needs to be a way to keep faculty more generally informed about developments and opportunities. I believe that there also needs to be significant and continuous faculty involvement in the oversight of the development of distributed education at Cornell. If every distributed-education program is treated as independent, and if no global perspective is provided, I believe that we run the risk of never addressing questions of the kind I have raised, and may then find that we have lost control over some of the qualities of University life that some of us hold most dear.